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Dedication and Disclaimer

Hello to all! Here's a quick note from myself, the author, to you, the audience. I'd like to thank you for taking an interest in my take on Mapleshade's story. I always felt she was robbed of something better when compared to other cats who did the same thing she did. Writing this delighted me, and I hope it delights you just as much - if not more.

I'd like to give a massive thanks to my qpp, Jex, for supporting me even though they had no fucking clue what I was on about almost every time I smacked them with a WIP. I'd also like to give a bigger thanks to Errol; they and I are rewrite buddies, and we bounce ideas off each-other frequently. Check out their rewrite blog at **tbpau** on tumblr!

And finally, thank you to all the members of the Split Thaw RP server, for putting up with my constant spam when I first came up with this idea and the weeks that followed, when I had a WIP in docs I wanted to share. Without y'all supporting me, I wouldn't have finished this. Thank you so much.

Now! Please keep in mind when reading this that every character depicted is my take on their personality. They may not think or act the exact same as canon; for that I apologize. I'm not a godsend, tragically, but I hope this brings something new to the table for you! Also keep in mind that for Maplestar's Light, specifically, the story may jump by several moons. It may get hard to keep track of time - this is partly on purpose, and it's written through my own experience with depression and mourning, something Mapleshade certainly suffers from - at least in this story.

There are only six true chapters, and this story is meant to serve as a prologue to the overarcing rewrite I have planned. For lore information, follow **maplewind-au** on tumblr!

Alright, I think that's it! Thank you for clicking, and I hope you

enjoy Maplestar's Light.

Allegiances

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER OAKSTAR—sturdy brown tom with amber eyes

DEPUTY PINEHEART—red-brown tom with green eyes

MEDICINE CAT RAVENWING—small black tom with blue eyes

APPRENTICES

SUNPAW—bright ginger tom with yellow eyes

DAPPLEPAW—tortoiseshell molly

RIVERCLAN

LEADER DARKSTAR—black molly

DEPUTY HAILSTEP—thick-pelted gray tom

MEDICINE CAT BRAMBLEBERRY—white molly with black spotted fur, blue eyes, and a pink nose

WARRIORS

APPLEDUSK—pale brown tom with green eyes

REEDSHINE—dark orange molly

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER CEDARSTAR—very dark gray tom with a white belly

DEPUTY STONETOOTH—gray tabby tom with long teeth

MEDICINE CAT SLOEFUR —black tom

MEDICINE CAT APPRENTICE SAGEPAW —white molly with long whiskers

WINDCLAN

LEADER HEATHERSTAR —pinkish-gray molly with blue eyes

DEPUTY REEDFEATHER—light brown tabby tom

MEDICINE CAT LARKWING—gray tabby molly

MEDICINE CAT APPRENTICE HAWKHEART—stone-grey tom with flecks of brown fur and yellow eyes.

WARRIORS

SWIFTFLIGHT—pale gray tabby tom

SANDGORSE—pale ginger tom

MIDGEPELT—patch-furred brown tom

PALEBIRD—black-and-white molly

BRACKENWING—pale ginger molly

MEADOWSLIP—gray molly

WHITEBERRY—small pure white tom

WOOLLYTAIL—gray-and-white tom

ASPENFALL—gray-and-white tom

DAWNSTRIPE—pale gold tabby molly with creamy stripes

APPRENTICES

MISTPAW—light brown tabby molly

HICKORYPAW —brown tom

APPLEPAW—rose-cream molly

ELDERS

LILYWHISKER—light brown molly

FLAILFOOT—black tom

LONERS

MAPLESHADE—fluffy tortoiseshell molly

SPARROW—dark brown tom

BESS—black molly with white paws

MOLE—dark gray tom

ALGERNON—creamy-brown tom

REENA—ginger molly

Prologue

--- Prologue

Vilify.

Don't even try.

"You told me you loved me! I went through the agony of bearing your kits! And now you treat me worse than prey. You will regret this, Appledusk. That is my last promise to you."

Mapleshade cried as she woke up. The image of Patchkit being ripped away from her was still so very fresh in her mind. Every time she slept, all she knew was the pull of the river, the cries of her children, the cold of the air around her while Appledusk snarled in her face. She awoke feeling hatred and betrayal and guilt.

How could I have been such a fool?

She should have never made a relationship with Appledusk. The tom was trouble from the moment she met him; in her gut, she had always known, but chosen to ignore it. She had eyes for no other cat - it felt like the only way she could be satisfied. But it had cost her... Everything.

Feeling groggy and sore, she looked up at the sky through clouded eyes.

It's a full moon. There'll be a gathering tonight.

Sighing, the molly got to her paws, cringing at the stiffness that made her joints pop and snap with the act. She might as well get there early - it wasn't like she had much else to do. Mapleshade knew she was almost a shell of her former self by now. She hadn't been able to make herself hunt, or - moreover, make any effort to survive. Water terrified her; she hadn't before respected its power,

and she regretted it now. She felt dehydrated and dizzy; every step she took was heavy and dragged on, her pelt snagged on every little thing she brushed by - but it didn't matter. Nobody would be able to distinguish her from the earth, at least, that much was certain. In part, it was relieving. She couldn't take more anger from the Clans; she just didn't have the strength.

She pulled into the bushes on the very edge of Fourtrees, pushing into her usual hiding place and settling in comfortably. No cat had ever come in from the angle she found herself at; she was perfectly hidden, especially so in the darkness.

It was sunset. The Clans wouldn't arrive until Moonhigh. It gave Mapleshade plenty of time to think.

They would be apprentices by now. They would have mentors of their own, and this might have been their first gathering. If they had grown up in RiverClan, they'd be bouncing around Appledusk's paws, chattering nonstop about meeting the other apprentices. Petalkit would show off. The idea brought a smile to her face as the sky slowly darkened. *They would make good friends across the borders, share games they figured out with other apprentices. They would have been... Wonderful.*

There was a rustle across the clearing. ShadowClan was first to arrive. RiverClan didn't keep them waiting long, and WindClan and ThunderClan arrived at the same time. All four leaders were on the rock before long, and Mapleshade couldn't help a sigh when she looked at the crowd below. ShadowClan began to divulge their news; the molly found herself spacing out, beginning to drift off again...

"We've caught the scent of Mapleshade at the border again."

Her name made her head jerk up, and her eyes widened as she stared towards the leaders. Darkstar was fixing Oakstar with a poisonous glare, which he only returned. "Sounds like you should be checking your borders more."

"Hmph. It figures that ThunderClan wouldn't take responsibility for their own mistakes."

"We did," Oakstar snarled, rising up as ThunderClan began to yowl their protests. "We exiled her the minute we found out the truth. If you didn't want her at your borders, perhaps you shouldn't have buried her kits on your land."

The two leaders hissed. Mapleshade choked. It never got easier, hearing them speak her name and deeds with such hatred. She managed to keep her eyes locked on the scene, though, noticing Heatherstar standing and looking to the sky. Mapleshade followed her gaze, and flinched as she saw the sky begin to cloud.

"StarClan is growing displeased," The rose leader called, pulling all attention to her. "It is best we lay the matter of Mapleshade to rest before they are angered. Darkstar, was that all you had to report, or is there more blame you'd like to lay on the other Clans?"

Darkstar's tail twitched, irritated, but he seemed to know better than to argue with the stars. "There is nothing more for me to report. RiverClan is doing... Swimmingly."

Though no cat dared groan at the pun, the silence that followed his words was deafening, broken only by Heatherstar's deep breath and authoritative voice as she delivered WindClan's news. A few pregnancies, new warriors, nothing unheard of. Mapleshade found herself drifting again halfway through Heatherstar's words, and faded to black before long, settled comfortably into her hollow.

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Yesterday had been bad. Today was worse.

Mapleshade managed to wake up at dawn this time, taking in the empty clearing for a moment before rising to her paws - and nearly collapsing under her own weight, light as it was. She was sure that under her fur, she was skinnier than a starved squirrel - not that it was hard to see. Her pelt was clinging to her frame, caked on by the gunk that had managed to get stuck to her. Despite the anger she had felt the night Appledusk rejected her, Mapleshade could find no such feelings in her now.

It's not just Appledusk that hates me. Everyone does. The territories

aren't home anymore.

She knew if RiverClan or ThunderClan so much as caught a glimpse of her, they would kill her. Not even her mentor, or her family, would accept her again, would welcome her presence. The idea made her paws numb - or maybe they had been already. She had no idea. All she knew now was that she had to leave - before they all made her.

Not that it makes a difference. I'm going to die anyway.

Her paws carried her into WindClan territory. The moors felt cold and barren, and she longed for the heavy forest that once was home. She could feel her bones grind in complaint with every step, and her eyes drooped as she carried on through the grass. Her mind wandered, and she wondered what lay beyond the territories. *Maybe I could find a badger and bring her back to murder that foxheart,* she thought, vaguely amusing herself with the idea. Her legs gave out quite suddenly, and her heart dropped as she realized she lacked the strength to rise again - she came to terms soon enough, though, closing her eyes and taking a few deep breaths.

... There are worse ways to die. At least I will see my darling loves soon, if StarClan sees any hope in me.

The world faded around her, and the last thing she remembered hearing were the rush of pawsteps through grass, rapidly approaching. It didn't matter. She was sure she'd be dead before they could question her.

Chapter 1

--- Ch. 1

You've got suckers' luck;

Have you given up?

Patchkit was swirling in the water. Petalkit had her claws hooked in Mapleshade's fur, only to be knocked off by a particularly violent wave. Larchkit wailed her name, clinging desperately to a branch. Mapleshade fought towards the branch, gasping and coughing as the water tried to kill her, too. If I can just get to the edge, *she thought,* I can save Petalkit and Larchkit, and go after Patchkit!

Just as she reached the bank, though, she felt claws dig into her paws, and let out a cry of pain, looking up in fear. Appledusk glared at her, keeping her held for the moment, and she wailed, struggling to pull her paws free.

"Appledusk, please! Save them!"

"I have no interest in them," He snarled. "Just as I have no interest in you. I hate you!"

He threw her off the bank, leaving her to scream. Petalkit was knocked loose. Larchkit's form hit her in the face before he was pulled away in the tide. The water rushed in her ears, growing louder - No, no no no, that was the waterfall. They were all going to die. She had condemned herself and her kits to death. Larchkit's scream echoed in her ears before she fell as well, mind going blank with pain and fear and regret; she looked down, and she could see it - rocks at the bottom, sharp, rushing towards her -

- She awoke with a start, gasping and heaving. Her fur was spiked with fear, and she took a moment to wake up properly, for a moment still living in the water. As she slowly calmed, she

managed to take in her surroundings. She was in some sort of medicine den, herb-scent strong in the air. The nest she was in almost felt as comfortable as the one in the ThunderClan nursery - but she could tell she wasn't home. *They wouldn't take me back anyway.* Maybe it was all just a bad dream?

Blinking a few times, she took a deep breath, absorbing the scent of the camp - and her eyes widened.

WindClan!

Just as the thought crossed her mind, a grey tabby entered the den, looking surprised to see her awake; it took a moment, but she recognized her - Larkwing. The medicine cat. She'd seen her at gatherings before, but never engaged.

"You're awake! How are you feeling?"

Mapleshade couldn't respond, her eyes distant as she rose to her paws. "Why... Why am I here?"

"Please, lie back down," Larkwing murmured, quickly padding over to try and calm her down. The fluffy molly flinched away, looking guarded as she continued. "One of our apprentices caught your scent on a patrol. The warriors couldn't wake you up, and took pity on you. Hauled you back here."

"Pity..." A growl rose in her throat. "I don't need the pity of WindClan cats."

The medicine cat's gaze hardened, and her tail twitched. "Well, you're starved, dehydrated, and your fur is matted - and, judging by your expression, you're in mourning. You're in no shape to be on your own. Lie down."

There was a moment where the mollies merely glared at each other, but Mapleshade found herself sinking to her belly, moved by Larkwing's tone. The tabby sniffed, seeming satisfied, and disappeared back out of the den, leaving Mapleshade to think with a sigh.

I suppose at the very least, they can get me back to health. Then I can

get revenge on that bastard tom, and his hussy. Maybe Darkstar, too. For good measure.

"Eat."

She blinked with surprise as Larkwing dropped a hare at her paws, and looked up, watching her collect a ball of moss.

"... I can't," She muttered. "Don't you have any queens or elders that need this more?"

"It's greenleaf," Larkwing replied, calmly turning to face Mapleshade with her claws hooked in the moss. "We have plenty of prey at this time of year, and the queens and elders have already had their fill. Besides, you're sick, and starved."

She stood again, heading towards the entrance, only to pause and look over her shoulder.

"I'm going to get this moss wet with water for you. I want you to stay in that nest, and eat. If you need any help, call for Hawkheart - he's my apprentice. He can help you with whatever you need."

She left with that, and Mapleshade sighed softly, sizing up the hare. It was a decent size, but the kill looked a little messy - an apprentice must have caught it. The scent enticed her to eat more than anything, though; as soon as she took her first bite, she realized just how hungry she was, and ripped into the meal, leaving only bones behind. Larkwing was back by the time she was finished, and purred, content, setting the moss down by Mapleshade. Seconds later, she was suckling it like a kit to it's mother's belly, leaving the medicine cat to nod approvingly.

"I'm glad to see you have an appetite," She trilled, cleaning her paws. "You're not the first starved cat I've ever treated, and some have been more stubborn about eating."

Mapleshade didn't reply, only letting go of the moss when it was entirely drained of water. She felt more alive than she had since the river, and started sitting up again - only for Larkwing's tail to guide her back down.

"Not yet. Maybe in a day or two. You need to rest. May I clean your pelt?"

There was a hesitation, but she nodded, slowly settling down again. Larkwing made herself comfortable next to her before running her tongue through the molly's fur, starting on one of the worse tangles. It was soothing, in a way, to be taken care of after all the grief. *It's what RiverClan should have provided me with,* she thought bitterly as she drifted off again. *Not WindClan.*

***

A few more days passed in the same routine. Most of the time, Larkwing took care of her, helping her clean out her pelt and work through her shock. Sometimes Hawkheart acted in her place, though he did so more reluctantly - Mapleshade felt compelled to give him an easier time, especially after learning that he'd given up his warrior status to be Larkwing's apprentice. Other apprentices began to cycle through as well, usually bringing wet moss or prey for Mapleshade; at first, they seemed intimidated, but eventually a little cream-and-red molly - Applepaw, she'd learned - asked why she left ThunderClan. Mapleshade wasn't exactly raring to tell her the story, but she managed to spin a dramatic, false version of it - one that spread among the apprentices quick, and before she knew it, she was resident storyteller, most of the time answering questions about ThunderClan and telling the stories of her apprentice days.

One day, though, she woke up to a new face - well. Personally new. She'd seen the molly several times before, but never this close - or this calmly. Larkwing spoke with Heatherstar, just inside the den, their tones hushed. Mapleshade strained her ears, trying to pick up what they were saying - but they noticed her wakefulness before she had too much of a chance, and Larkwing padded over, purring softly.

"So, Mapleshade, how are you feeling today?"

"I'm... I'm feeling better than I have in moons," She replied, slowly sitting up. The medicine cat hummed and nodded, giving her a once-over.

"You've got meat on your bones and your fur is shining again. Those eyes are still a little misty, though. Heatherstar and I have been talking - it'd be best to get you some fresh air after all this bedrest. Come - let's get you out into camp."

The tortoiseshell molly hesitated, giving Heatherstar a side-eye, but complied with Larkwing, slowly standing up and beginning to walk - her weeks of rest and weakness made her stumble, but the tabby was quick to lean under her shoulder - a rather uncomfortable position for such a tall cat - and they made their way out to camp, tailed by Heatherstar. Mapleshade flinched under the brightness of the sun, blinking a few times as her eyes adjusted fully to the light. When they did, she managed to take in WindClan camp - and it was beautiful.

WindClan's camp was open to the wind and sky, unlike most camps. The tall grass surrounded it in a thick wall, broken by a large stone in the northern wall; Mapleshade could pick out a den in the side, and figured out rather quickly that it was the leaders'. The elders' and nursery were more covered than the others, likely for the health of the weaker cats inside; the warriors' and apprentices' were situated close together, near the entrance of the camp. She could make out two warriors just beyond the wall, standing guard - or vigil, she couldn't tell. A group of kits played together near the rock, with their mothers watching them carefully - in fact, all cats seemed to be minding their own business until Heatherstar emerged from behind Mapleshade and Larkwing.

That was when the attention shifted.

Very suddenly, she felt all eyes on her, and her fur rose. The apprentices seemed somewhat enthusiastic, if reserved in the face of their mentors - the warriors and elders all fixed her with either wary stares or downright glares. Mapleshade didn't blame them - she was an outsider. She'd been eating their food and herbs for several days, and she came from another Clan with a scandalous background - she'd hate her, too. In fact, she did.

However, she felt a different kind of gaze from the nursery as Larkwing and Heatherstar sat her down under the shade of the rock. Glancing over, she noticed the queens - they stared at her in pity,

and empathy. They shared her pain - despite having not shared her true story yet, she could feel it in their eyes - they knew. They knew what had happened before she came.

Queens gossip. Perhaps one of the ThunderClan queens blabbed to a WindClan one at a gathering.

There was a small surge of solidarity in her chest, and she looked away as the emotion swelled. She was distracted from thinking about it by a squeal, and jolted as a trio of kits stampeded over, bouncing at Mapleshade's paws.

"It's a stranger! Attack!"

"She's got the leader!"

"We'll save you, Heatherstar!"

As a grey tabby kit chewed on her tail, her mind was whisked back to ThunderClan's nursery. Frecklewish lay in the nest next to her, chattering excitedly about her oncoming litter. Outside, she could hear Petalkit scheming with her brothers, and she craned her neck to keep an eye on them. Rabbitfur was sitting by the fresh-kill pile, taking his time to choose his prey - but he took too much, and the trio suddenly leapt on his back, bowling him over. He had enough spirit to play along with their game, crying out how he'd been taken down by the strongest warriors the forest had ever seen.

"Ryekit! Doekit! Stagkit! You come over here this instant!"

The moment was gone, and Mapleshade returned to see one of the queens - a light brown molly - ushering her kits away, dipping her head apologetically to the three mollies.

"I'm so sorry about them, Heatherstar. They get so out of control sometimes."

"It's quite alright, Mistmouse," the leader purred, flicking her tail. As the queen left, she shot Mapleshade a glance, tilting her head. "Are you alright?"

Under Heatherstar's question, Mapleshade blinked a few times,

realizing quite suddenly she'd been crying. She looked back up at the leader before cowering, shutting her eyes and trying to stifle her emotions. She felt Larkwing shift, and, after a moment, Heatherstar's paw touched her side, making her look up.

"Mapleshade," She started, "we've heard your name at gatherings. We don't know what happened, other than the loss of your kits -"

"I broke the code," she choked out, interrupting Heatherstar. "I broke the code and killed my kits."

There was a pause between them. Heatherstar lowered her paw, giving Mapleshade all her attention, and she stuttered, gathering her breath.

"I - I fell in love with a RiverClan tom. Appledusk. He was charming and handsome, and he - I - he swore he loved me. We kept our relationship a secret, and one day, I found out that I was carrying his kits. I planned to - to raise them in ThunderClan, until they were old enough, accepted by the Clan... But Oakstar, he found out. He exiled all four of us."

There was a flash in Heatherstar's eyes. Mapleshade couldn't quite place the emotion - some strain of anger. But her expression indicated nothing, and the tortoiseshell continued on.

"I... I didn't know what else to do, so I brought them to RiverClan, hoping that at least Appledusk would take them in. I hoped he would take me, too, but as long as -- as long as they were safe, I'd be happy. But when we crossed the river, a wave swept us away... He was on patrol with two warriors, and I survived, but my kits... My precious loves, they..."

She choked. Larkwing wrapped her tail around her.

"... We made it to camp," She finished. "Appledusk claimed he regretted his mistake, that he never loved me. He claimed a new mate in RiverClan, who spoke to his staying. They buried my kits on their land, and exiled me -- they didn't even allow me to rest for the night. I'd never seen Appledusk look at me with so much hate. Then, I... I just tried to survive on the borders for a few moons. Fat

lot of good it did me."

She stared at her paws, tears streaming down her face. Heatherstar and Larkwing remained silent - though, she did overhear Larkwing calling Appledusk rotten crow-food under her breath - for a long time. Finally, she looked up at Heatherstar again.

"You should kill me," She murmured. "I'm a traitor to my Clan and the code. I don't belong in the Clans anymore."

Still, the silence remained. Heatherstar stared for another long minute before finally standing up and flicking her tail - a dismissal. She padded away as Larkwing nudged Mapleshade to her paws again, heading back to the medicine den.

"That fresh air was very good for you! I think we'll start letting you out in camp more regularly. And, Mapleshade -" She paused as Mapleshade settled reluctantly into her nest, gaze softening. "I'm so sorry you had to go through that. No mother deserves to lose her kits, no matter what she's done."

"But I broke the code," Mapleshade croaked. Larkwing lifted her tail, shaking her head.

"You might have broken the code, but Oakstar did, too, by exiling your kits. The code states that no Clan shall ignore a kit in need. Exiling you would have been one thing - but your children? Not to mention Appledusk's cruelty. You fell for a fox's trap, Mapleshade - that's all there is to it. No cat can blame you for that. So many others have done it before you."

Tears threatened to fall again, and Mapleshade swallowed, nodding. "Thank you, Larkwing."

"You get some rest," She purred. "If you have more to talk about, we can do it tomorrow. I am here for you, Mapleshade. WindClan is on your side."

Chapter 2

-- Ch. 2

Does it feel like a trial?

Does it trouble your mind the way you trouble mine?

The next few days introduced a new routine. Larkwing came up with a new strategy to help Mapleshade work through her grief and anger -

"At sunrise, you tell me one thing about one of your kits that you miss and loved. At sundown, tell me what you think Oakstar or Appledusk - or, any cat involved other than yourself, really - deserves for what they did."

It was working, mostly. Mapleshade found herself recovering faster, and every time she vented to Larkwing, the thoughts of violence she'd been having for moons left her mind, settled as she realized that, at the end of the day, they wouldn't do much good. She remained in the medicine den overnight, but went out into camp for most of the day, mostly walking laps and doing apprentices' work when the apprentices weren't available. Usually, she felt the same old stares on her from warriors, and listened to the whispers of the Clan. Every now and then, she caught them talking with Heatherstar or Reedfeather, and overheard the conversations.

"You need to get her out of here. She's a ThunderClan exaltee! Who knows what trouble she'll bring to the Clan?"

"She is sick," The high ranks would always reply. "And unless StarClan themselves come to tell us to exile her, she will stay."

And the warriors would leave in a huff, always unhappy.

She bonded well with the apprentices, usually picking up tasks for

them or teaching them unique ThunderClan tricks to try out on their spare time. Their enthusiasm was her validation, as was that of the kits, who eventually came to join her during storytime. The elders grew fond of her after she cycled through with prey and mouse bile a few times, expressing how glad they were to have such a responsible young molly taking care of them when so many warriors seemed to ignore them, or forget to visit.

"My daughter, Dawnstripe," Lilywhisker had chimed one day, "Only visits me when she has to deliver something. I only see her then, and when Heatherstar calls for a meeting. Now, I ask you, Mapleshade, how is that fair?"

"It's not," Mapleshade responded, shaking her head. "In ThunderClan, our cats are always visiting our elders. When I was there, we held the utmost respect for you!"

"I suppose that's the only thing ThunderClan does right," Flailfoot chuckled, earning soft laughs from Lilywhisker and Mapleshade.

Mistmouse tended to talk to her, as Mapleshade was used to caring for her kits when she needed a minute's rest. Ryekit, Doekit and Stagkit were apprenticed before leaf-fall, and she cheered loud with Mistmouse at their naming. The nursery was quickly filled again by Brackenwing - one of the mollies who hadn't taken well to Mapleshade's staying in camp. The loss of one of her closer friends had hurt her, but she didn't suffer too long - in mid leaf-fall, another molly entered the nursery.

"Oh! You're Mapleshade, right?"

She'd looked up from fixing the nests, blinking in surprise at the tiny black-and-white queen before her.

"I should hope so. You are?"

"Palebird," She chirped. "Sorry to be in your way! I'm just choosing a nest."

"Ah! Is it your first litter?"

"Sure is! Sandgorse is the father," Palebird purred, perking as

Mapleshade shifted to one side and offered her the nest she'd just finished. "Neither of us are in love - thank you so much! - but we both wanted kits! So he agreed to surrogate for me. To tell you the truth, though, I'm a little nervous. It sounds like kitting hurts so much."

"Why, that sounds wonderful, Palebird! Kitting does hurt - it's agonizing and long, but you're blessed with a wonderful pair of medicine cats and a strong Clan. Things rarely go wrong, and every second of pain is worth the love you'll feel with those little souls snuggled up to your belly."

Mapleshade smiled, sighing softly while Palebird tilted her head. "You sound very wise. Have you had kits before?"

"I did, once," She murmured. "But I made a foolish choice, and lost them."

"O-oh... I'm so sorry..."

She flicked her tail. "It was a long time ago," Mapleshade sighed, putting a smile back on. "I've managed to move on in honour of them. Let's just focus on you and yours for now!"

She and Palebird grew very close in the coming weeks, spending more time together as her pregnancy progressed and learning things about each other. Palebird told her all about being a tunneler, and the constant risk that ran with the job; in return, Mapleshade shared her story with the molly, and they only seemed to grow closer.

It seemed like every day, the Clan grew less and less hostile to Mapleshade. She still spent her nights in the medicine den, but she was quick to replace her bedding every morning, making sure it'd be sterile for an actually sick cat if someone came in injured or ill. Leaf-fall turned into leafbare, and with it, the prey pile started to empty. She noticed Heatherstar whispering to Reedfeather, one morning, but thought very little of it, continuing her stretches.

"Gather around for patrol assignments! We're gonna need more hunting today, so I want my best hunters at the front. Midgepelt,

lead a patrol with Dawnstripe and Appledawn. I want you on the south end. Sandgorse, you'll lead Aspenfall, Doepaw, and... Mapleshade. I want you near the Thunderpath."

Mapleshade froze, looking over in surprise. Doepaw was beaming, and Aspenfall had a look of approval - Sandgorse, however, seemed to frown. "Me?"

Reedfeather snorted. "I said your name, didn't I? You all get a move on. Hickorynose, Ryepaw, and Hareflight, you're on border duty. Go along as many as you can. The rest of you, get on cleaning the snow out of your dens, then go out and scavenge. We need to stock up - leafbare hit early."

The cats dispersed, and Mapleshade hurried over to her patrol, following closely as Sandgorse stalked ahead.

"I'm really glad you're with us, Mapleshade!" Doepaw trilled. "You can show me those ThunderClan techniques you taught me!"

"We don't need ThunderClan techniques," Sandgorse hissed before Mapleshade could interject, making Doepaw droop. "We're WindClan. Our techniques work just fine."

Mapleshade's ears twitched, and she saw Aspenfall roll his eyes. *Who put bees in his nest last night?*

"Not to worry, Sandgorse," She said aloud. "I plan on learning from you three how WindClan hunts. After all, your prey is so different."

Sandgorse merely grunted in response.

The party travelled in silence for the most part, eyes and ears on the alert for prey; before long, Doepaw stopped the adventure with a soft chirp, directing everyone's attention towards a hare. It was a rather fat and healthy looking beast, and would definitely feed many cats. Sandgorse dropped into a crouch immediately, only to be stopped by Aspenfall.

"Look at where it's standing. If we attack from here, it could run onto the Thunderpath, right onto ShadowClan turf."

"Well, we can't lose it," Sandgorse growled, his tail lashing. "We need it too much."

Mapleshade listened to the warriors for a moment, watching the rabbit, before stepping between them, her tail twitching. "I have an idea. If one cat sits by the thunderpath, then two others sit behind it and to one side, the cat from behind can scare it into one of our paws. As long as we keep it away from a burrow," She smiled. "It's a guaranteed catch."

Aspenfall paused, thinking about it.

"... It might just work. Let's try it."

Mapleshade remained where she was, dropping down and rolling in the snow to better hide the patches of colour in her pelt. Sandgorse took the side closest to the thunderpath, Doepaw waited to the left, and Aspenfall crept all the way around, coming up behind it. There was a tense moment where he glanced between every cat to make sure they were ready before leaping.

The hare screeched and bolted, straight towards the thunderpath. Sandgorse sprung out, aiming to kill, but missed; it dodged away from him and towards Mapleshade. She managed to take it for a moment, claws in its pelt, but a sharp kick to the face made her lose her grip, and she panted, looking up in time to see Doepaw leap on it and deal a killing bite to its neck. It struggled for a moment before going entirely still, and the warriors charged over to meet her.

"Great job, Doepaw!" Aspenfall praised, looking it over. Mapleshade purred loudly, inspecting the catch.

"And it's a clean kill, too! Absolutely stellar, Doepaw. You're a natural."

"You came up with the technique," Doepaw responded, though she was clearly glowing with pride. "Thanks, Mapleshade! I can't wait to show Ryepaw and Stagpaw!"

"Why don't you carry it back," Aspenfall suggested, nosing his

apprentice. "So Heatherstar can see what a good job you did?"

Doepaw nodded enthusiastically, leading the party back to camp; Mapleshade managed to hear a few mice under the snow and dirt, and snatched those with the help of the warriors on the way back, winding up with a good haul at the end of the day. Just as they were placing the last of their catches on the pile, Hawkheart darted up to Mapleshade.

"Palebird is kitting!"

"What?!"

She whipped her head around, darting to the nursery instantly. She heard Sandgorse snap something about not being told first to Hawkheart, but paid it no mind; all her thoughts were suddenly honed on Palebird and her kits.

I wonder what they'll look like! As lovely as their mother, I'm so sure!

She skidded to a halt inside the den, hurrying to Palebird's side; her teeth were already sunken into the stick, and Larkwing hovered over her. Mapleshade shared a glance with the medicine cat before pushing a paw gently against Palebird's belly, hushing her while Sandgorse and Hawkheart thundered in; the latter set himself up to receive the kits, while Sandgorse merely hovered nearby, watching.

"You're doing amazing, Palebird," Mapleshade purred, pressing her cheek against the new mothers'. "Just listen to Larkwing and do as she says. You're going to do great."

Palebird nodded, perking her ears to Larkwing's orders; "It feels like two, Palebird. I'm going to need you to push right when I tell you to. Ready? Now!"

The first kit to come out was a little black and white tom. Hawkheart freed him before passing him to Mapleshade after Sandgorse balked at the suggestion of licking him clean. Mapleshade, rolling her eyes at the father, gladly took the little kit, grooming him clean.

"Tallkit," Sandgorse chimed. "His name will be Tallkit."

"You didn't even ask Palebird," Mapleshade argued, ceasing her licking when the little tom wiggled and holding her near her belly protectively while Palebird pushed out the second. Sandgorse hissed in response.

"I don't need to. He's my son, and I'll name him what I please!"

"This one is Finchkit," Palebird cried, letting go of the stick and giving Sandgorse a poisonous glare. "She is *my* daughter, and *I'll* name her what *I* please!"

Mapleshade joined the molly in glaring at Sandgorse, but stopped when Hawkheart spoke up.

"Larkwing, she - she's not moving."

Sandgorse stepped back as Palebird darted up, spinning to lick the kit herself, desperate for her to move. Larkwing and Hawkheart gave her space, for a moment, looking down with folded ears as Palebird gave a broken wail of grief.

Mapleshade couldn't move.

She looked at the ginger form of Finchkit before Palebird and felt nothing but pain envelop her heart again, and, for a moment, she swore she saw Patchkit, Petalkit, and Larchkit sitting around her, helping her to her paws and giving a little glance and smile to their mama before leading her to StarClan. Then Palebird turned and collapsed against her, and she snapped back to reality, pulling the queen against her and closing her eyes.

I know how you feel, my sweet, she thought to herself. *And I will not let you grieve alone, as I had to.*

Sandgorse looked to Finchkit, approaching her slowly - but Mapleshade growled and lifted her tail, shaking her head.

"I wouldn't touch her, if I were you. A queen needs time to grieve her loss. We will bury her when Palebird is ready."

The tom's eyes shone with fury for a long moment, but Hawkheart acted quickly, pulling him out of the den. Larkwing stayed behind,

her head dipped in respect and mourning.

"Palebird, I'm... So sorry for your loss."

It took a long moment, but Palebird finally managed to look up with a sniffle, nodding.

"Th - thank you, Larkwing, Mapleshade. I just... She didn't even have a chance..."

Mapleshade drooped and sighed, only to perk again at Tallkit's shrill mew, and the three mollies looked to him with smiles as he pushed between his mother and her best friend. "He will make the most of his chance for her," Mapleshade murmured, looking at Palebird. "You'll raise him into a fine tom, Palebird."

Her tail drifted over the molly's flank before she tangled her own into Mapleshade's.

"We will, Mapleshade. I can't do this alone, and I would trust no other cat to help mother my kit."

Mapleshade felt her chest fill with warmth again, and she smiled widely at Palebird, eyes glowing. She had felt this way around Appledusk, all those moons ago; but this time, it was different. Palebird and Mapleshade truly loved each other, and she knew they would not let go.

When the sun set, she and Larkwing buried Finchkit just outside of camp, by a foxglove bush. For the first time since she came to the Clan, Mapleshade slept in the nursery with Palebird and Tallkit, feeling whole and full of love in a way she never thought she would.

Chapter 3

-- Ch. 3

Now you're thinking too fast,

You're like marbles on glass.

"Quail? This late?"

"Shush."

Appledawn stayed crouched next to Mapleshade, and Doepaw slowly followed their examples, leaving Woollytail to watch a few paces back. Sure enough, Mapleshade's suspicions were correct, and the fowl shook a lump of snow off her back, looking around. The patrol was downwind, and quickly assumed their usual strategic hunting position. Mapleshade struck it down, this time, and purred, bringing it back to the rest of their gathered prey and smiling at Woollytail.

"This will feed the Clan for days!"

"Good timing, too. Brackenwing's kits have eaten almost all the prey we caught. They're growing fast."

They hauled their catches back to camp, and Mapleshade sighed as a few rattling coughs rang through camp. Larkwing had been terribly sick these past few days, and despite his best efforts, Hawkheart was unable to heal her entirely. Trying to ignore the cold feeling that she felt in her chest, she surveyed the camp, taking in a deep breath. Heatherstar was talking with Reedfeather under the rock. Palebird and Brackenwing enjoyed some time outside, and Mapleshade purred as she watched Tallkit bicker with Shrewkit. He was growing quickly, and she was more than happy to see him putting her knowledge to use when verbally warring with the kit.

His battle skills, though...

She continued watching as Shrewkit easily pinned him down, and sighed as Barkkit hauled him off, the siblings starting her own fight. Tallkit took notice of Mapleshade, then, and let out an enthused *mrrow*, bounding over.

"You're back! Did you get some good catches?"

"Oh, I did," She purred, crouching down to meet him. "We found some delightful mice, a slightly scrawny hare, and a great big quail. Why don't you come and see?"

Allowing him to bounce around her paws and chatter with excitement, Mapleshade zoned out again; first, she focused on Palebird and purred, admiring how the cold light of leaf-bare made her pelt shine like Silverpelt. Then she pulled her attention away, glancing between the warriors and picking up on other bits of conversation; she heard Woollytail and Sandgorse talking about the tunnel project, Reedfeather chatting with a pair of apprentices who had grown unruly, and...

Hawkheart and Heatherstar. Heatherstar was crossing camp with the medicine cat at her side, and they seemed hushed, glancing between each other before disappearing into the den. It made Mapleshade's pelt prickle with unease.

"... Mapleshade?"

"Hmm?" She jumped, looking down at Tallkit; he adopted a confused expression, and she dipped her head apologetically. "I'm sorry, sweetness, I'm a little distracted."

He frowned, leaning against her leg. "Is it Larkwing? Mama told me about how you were close with her before you moved to the nursery with us."

"It's nothing you need to be worried about. Why don't you run off and challenge Shrewkit and Barkkit to some moss-ball? Nobody can beat you."

"Thanks to you!" He purred, bounding off obediently. Mapleshade

watched him go with a smile, sighing to herself before a tap on her shoulder caught her attention, and she noticed Hawkheart standing next to her, looking saddened.

"Mapleshade, Larkwing is... Going."

"No..."

She stood and followed him into the medicine den, her ears folding at the sad sight of the soft tabby on her nest. Her face was glazed with pain, but also delight to see her closest friends, managing to sit up a little and smile at them.

"I'm so glad that StarClan has blessed me with the chance to say goodbye to my friends."

"Larkwing," Mapleshade croaked, "You can't be leaving us now?"

"My time is up. Age has caught up to me, so has whitecough. Mind yourselves, don't catch any disease."

Heatherstar drooped, closing her eyes. "Larking, you've served us well since Swiftstar's rule. StarClan will greet you well."

"I owe you so much," Hawkheart murmured, grief clouding his eyes. "I promise I will serve my Clan until the day I die, using the knowledge you've given me."

Larkwing purred, despite the coughing that her display caused, and something inside Mapleshade shattered. She crouched next to the medicine cat, ears folding further.

"I owe you... My life, Larkwing. Even though I was cruel and mean to you at first, you healed me and helped me find a place in WindClan. I would not be alive now, if not for you - and, I suspect some other cats wouldn't be either, if I'm honest," She added, sharing a chuckle with Larkwing.

"Mapleshade, I'm so glad we allowed you to join the Clan. You've earned your place here, and WindClan will always welcome and look up to you."

The four cats stayed together in silence for a short while, absorbing each other's company, before Larkwing sighed and settled herself more comfortably.

"Hawkheart, please, get me the poppy seeds like we talked about. It's time. The rest of you, please, leave me to cross over in my rest, and know I will watch you from the stars."

Heatherstar and Mapleshade dipped their heads, turning together and pushing carefully out of the den. Mapleshade took a deep breath, looking to Heatherstar; they grey molly's head was held high, and she turned to face the warrior with a warm look.

"Larkwing is right, you know. In the face of so much doubt and suspicion, you proved your loyalty to us. I'm glad my warriors found you."

"I'm grateful you've let me stay," Mapleshade purred in response, dipping her head. "You've been very kind to me, Heatherstar, after everything I've done..."

She sniffed. "I don't always trust the warrior code," She confessed, earning a surprised look from Mapleshade. "It's a code that tells us to ignore our feelings and better senses, in most cases, and there may be good reasons for some of them... But some of these codes are so often broken, what's the sense in keeping them?"

"... Heatherstar?"

The leader's eyes looked clouded for a moment, then they cleared, and she smiled at Mapleshade. "What I mean to say is, you followed your heart. Any good warrior follows their heart; their heart tells them what's right... Most of the time. It's no fault of yours that StarClan punished you for doing what so many other cats have done and will do." There was a pause, and she laughed. "I never liked Oakstar. Did you know ThunderClan is under new leadership now? Pinestar's his name. We met at the last gathering. He seems kind enough, but I worry, sometimes, that he will be misguided, blinded by StarClan's light."

Mapleshade stayed quiet for a long time, listening to Heatherstar

ramble, before shrugging her shoulders. "I'm biased, Heatherstar," she murmured, somewhat tentative. "But in my experience, ThunderClan cats hate what's alien to them. Anything that's 'other' is a threat, unless it's from the stars. Unless they find reform, it will be their undoing. Until then, if you'd like my advice..." She paused again, looking into her leader's eyes. "... We should be very careful when it comes to them. They are fragile and prideful."

There was a long pause between them before a low wail sounded out through camp, and their attention snapped to the medicine den; Hawkheart hauled Larkwing's still body out into the clearing, and cats began to emerge from their dens, grief clouding the air. Glancing towards the nursery, Mapleshade watched Palebird rise to her paws and cast a glance her way, ears folding. Tallkit hovered around his mother's paws, firing off questions about Larkwing while the elders passed them, heading over to console Hawkheart.

"I think I will make Shrewkit and Barkkit apprentices tomorrow," Heatherstar murmured, somewhat absently. "It would be harmful for the Clan to focus on our loss."

"I agree."

The mollies looked to each other again.

"I hope you'll join me for vigil tonight. We'll sit at the top of the hollow and watch the stars for a sign that Larkwing made it."

Mapleshade purred, feeling a new wave of grief wash over her. "I would be delighted to, Heatherstar. I'll tell Palebird, so Tallkit doesn't ask where I am."

And just as she said, that night, she sat atop the Tallrock with Hawkheart and Heatherstar; Larkwing's body had long since been buried, near where Finchkit had been laid to rest a few moons before, and they stared up at Silverpelt, three cats in unity, giving a final vigil for their medicine cat.

***

"You'll be an apprentice soon," She heard Flamepelt chime to

Tallkit, curling his tail over his paws. "Are you gonna be a tunnel-digger like your mom and pop?"

Tallkit shuffled his paws. "I, um... I don't know."

Mapleshade sighed softly to herself. Tallkit had spoken with her, privately; she was well aware of his fear of the ground, thanks to Shrewpaw's bullying when they were younger.

"Well," the elder purred, "whatever you become, you're going to be a great warrior. The petal doesn't fall far from the flower, after all."

Tallkit merely nodded in response, excusing himself softly and hurrying across camp to sit with Mapleshade. She swept her tail around him, smiling. "Flamepelt asking the big questions again?"

"I... Yeah."

"Don't feel pressured, no matter what," she purred. "Heatherstar is very wise, and she'll give you a job that suits you fine. And, if it doesn't work out, you just come to mama Maple, and I'll have a chat with her."

Tallkit smiled as Mapleshade ruffled his head fur with a paw, shoving her with a purr. "Thanks, Mapleshade."

"I've got your back, kiddo."

She looked up as Heatherstar emerged from her den, ears perking as the leader set her eyes on them and bounded up onto the Hollow.

"Let all cats old enough to stretch their legs gather beneath Tallrock!"

"That's us," Mapleshade purred, nudging Tallkit forth. Palebird hurried away from the nursery to join them, feverently grooming Tallkit and earning a groan from him while Mapleshade chuckled, turning her attention to the slowly gathering Clanmates. The elders rested just outside their den, and Meadowslip joined them, smiling at Palebird supportively. Heatherstar waited patiently for everyone to gather before raising her tail for silence - and her next words took the entire Clan off guard.

"We are gathered here today to celebrate two naming ceremonies."

Mapleshade jolted, looking around in confusion. Only Tallkit was old enough to be named - Doepaw, Ryepaw, and Stagpaw still had a good few moons of training left to do...

"Mapleshade, please step up next to me."

She froze at that, staring dumbly up at Heatherstar for a moment, before a nip at her ankles from Tallkit pulled her back to reality; she looked first to her family. Palebird was giving an encouraging smile; Tallkit pushed up against her, nodding approvingly. Over to her Clanmates - Hawkheart sat by the medicine den, looking stoic at first glance, but she saw the approval in his eyes. Reedfeather was dipping his head - surely, he'd known about this. Overall, the Clan shone with excitement and confusion, with only a few disapproving glares between them; these were easily overshadowed with support. Taking a deep breath, Mapleshade absorbed them as they looked now, leaping up atop the rock to meet Heatherstar evenly - for the first time, feeling truly intimidated by the leader before her as she began to speak again.

"Spirits of StarClan, you know every cat by name. I ask you now to take away the name from the cat you see before you, for it no longer stands for what she is."

The camp was deathly quiet. Mapleshade's breath hitched as Heatherstar smiled.

"By my authority as Clan leader, and with the approval of our warrior ancestors, I give this cat a new name. From this moment on she will be known as Mapleshine; no longer does a shadow taint her heart. Instead, she shines among us in WindClan, bringing new light and new hope to our Clan."

Mapleshade -- no. Maple*shine* felt dizzy when the leader put her chin upon her head; she almost forgot to lick her shoulder with respect, but she managed just in time for Heatherstar to pull away; the mollies faced the Clan, and blood rushed through Mapleshine's ears as the Clan practically screamed her new name, some cats rearing up in their excitement.

"Mapleshine! Mapleshine! Mapleshine!"

Once again, she absorbed her Clanmates -- *her Clanmates* -- as they were now. Even though some were still sporting grimaces and glares, every single one of them called her name, and it carried her heart up into the air.

What happened in the past doesn't define me anymore. I'm free, and I have a place.

As the cries died down, Mapleshine leapt back down the stone, immediately being smothered by licks from Palebird that made her purr loudly. She could feel Sandgorse's glare on her pelt, but it didn't matter, not now.

"If we may continue..."

The two mollies turned their gaze to Tallkit, who stood just under the imposing stone with his head held high.

"Tallkit! You have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Tallpaw. Your mentor will be Mapleshine."

Once again, there was a mumbling dissent. Mapleshine's heart soared for a moment, but she did pause, tilting her head. *The warrior code...*

Up above, Heatherstar snorted.

"Great StarClan. The warrior code states that a kit-mother cannot mentor her own kit, but it says nothing about his adoptive mother, now, does it?"

The murmurs died out, most cats nodding, Heatherstar, seeming satisfied, looked to Mapleshine, and the tortoiseshell stepped forth to join Tallpaw, smiling at him before both turned their attention back to Heatherstar.

"Now... Mapleshine, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have proven yourself a fine warrior, and you have shown yourself

to be loyal and patient. You will be the mentor of Tallpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to him. I know you will not let us down."

With a grateful nod, Mapleshine turned her attention to Tallpaw, craning her neck down to meet him. They touched noses, and with that, the Clan began to chant Tallpaw's name. Mapleshine scanned the crowd, her gaze halting on Sandgorse; she felt a chill when she noticed his hateful look, and after cheering his son's name twice, he turned and stalked out of the crowd. Heatherstar leapt down from the stone, giving a respectful nod to the new apprentice and mentor as she passed, and Palebird hurried up, giving Tallpaw the same lick-treatment Mapleshine had gotten almost minutes prior.

"I'm so proud of both of you! Mapleshine, you'll be an amazing mentor - Tallpaw, I would have rathered you be apprenticed to a tunneller... But I know you're in good paws."

Tallpaw gave an uncertain smile, dipping his head to his mother; Mapleshine purred, knowing he was merely overwhelmed. She drifted her tail over his pelt, glancing between her apprentice and - was Palebird her mate? *I'll have time to figure that out later.*

"Palebird, you're a warrior again, aren't you? I need to give Tallpaw a round of the territory - if he's up to it -" She paused when he gave an enthusiastic nod. "- and you're welcome to join us for the patrol. It will be good to stretch your legs."

"Take Appledawn with you," Reedfeather called from across camp, earning the attention of the cream molly. "I was assigning her to the next border patrol anyway."

Palebird purred. "I'll be happy to come."

Nodding and rounding up Appledawn, Mapleshine led the patrol, thriving off the excitement in Tallpaw's eyes and bounding out into the moor with a new energy.

WindClan is my home!

Chapter 4

-- Ch. 4

Does it feel like a trial?

Did you fall for the same empty answers again?

"Great catch, Tallpaw!"

Reena purred next to Mapleshine, and she glanced at the young cat with amusement. She wasn't a big fan of the visitors, but they were kind and earned their keep - and Reena was an enthusiastic young cat, watching Tallpaw in awe as he licked his lips of the blood from the hare that had erupted from the tunnel just moments earlier. Woollytail poked his head out shortly after with a purr.

"I thought I smelled rabbit."

"Woollytail," Mapleshine laughed. "Were you hunting down there?"

"No, it gave me a good spook! One minute, I'm shoring up the walls of the tunnel - the next, this big rabbit's hurtling towards me! Of course, I'm not going to let prey run out of my claws if I see it, so I chased it."

"We're lucky you were there, then." She purred, glancing to Tallpaw as he perked up. "Who's down there with you?"

"Sandgorse and Plumclaw. They're working on the second gorge tunnel."

Mapleshine watched Tallpaw blink with surprise, and frowned. "... A second one? Isn't one enough?"

"Oh, no. The water's just too unpredictable, and the first one flooded when Tallpaw came with us on the trip."

Suddenly, anger shot through her veins, and she looked to her

apprentice. "He *what*."

Tallpaw's head was dipped down, some sort of shame and fear in his expression. "Sandgorse talked me into coming when you were on border patrol," He chirped. "I wanted to make him happy..."

That damn tom! Mapleshine's tail whipped across the grass, and she took a deep breath, digging her claws into the dirt. *He could have killed Tallpaw!*

Forcing herself to stay calm, she turned to Woollytail. "Did you at least tell Heatherstar about the collapse?"

"No." Woollytail looked confused. "Why should she have to know? She's no tunneller."

"Oh, for StarClan's sake! She's your leader!" Mapleshine hissed, twitching her tail and thinking about the best course of action for a long minute. The sound of Hareflight and Shrewpaw approaching relieved her, and she turned. "Hareflight, do you have room for two more on your patrol?"

The warrior nodded, puzzled. "Uh... Yes. Why?"

"Can you take Tallpaw and Reena with you? Woollytail and I need to go see Heatherstar."

She could practically feel the warrior seethe with contempt, but ignored it, smiling as Hareflight nodded and beckoned the apprentice and loner along. She snagged Tallpaw's hare before leaving, leading Woollytail back to camp with a growl.

Enough is enough.

***

"Why did you have to tell Heatherstar you almost drowned?"

"I - I didn't! Woollytail told Mapleshine!"

"You're such a coward, you can't even own up to your own mistake!"

Mapleshine lost herself. One moment, she was following Heatherstar away from the hollow. The next, Sandgorse's shout caught her ears, and she spun around, racing over. The tom had done enough. He had gone behind her back, endangered her apprentice, and now he was yelling at him - for what? Tallpaw had done nothing wrong. She couldn't stop her anger, rushing over and scoring her claws across Sandgorse's face. He yowled, staggering back and staring at her in shock.

"How dare you!" She hissed. "Your own reckless choice almost cost your son his life!"

"We've spent moons on that project, and now it gets abandoned due to his cowardice!"

"He did nothing wrong!" She got up in Sandgorse's face, daring him to try attacking her. "Just because a son you barely care for does not fall in with the path you choose... You don't get to accuse him this way! He doesn't deserve this treatment! It was not his fault!"

He sneered. "... No. It was yours."

"And now, I've saved the life of your son and countless other tunnelers who could have died." There was a long pause, and she backed away from him, keeping her glare even. "Stay away from Tallpaw. You've lost all right to call him your son."

"With pleasure," He growled, turning to stalk away. Mapleshine hesitated, then turned to face Tallpaw, gaze softening at his tearful look. She pulled him close, wrapping her tail around him and looking up when she sensed Heatherstar's gaze on her. The leader simply nodded with respect, continuing on her way after a long pause, and Mapleshine let out a breath, shutting her eyes with relief.

***

Mapleshine huffed as her tail was stepped on - again, for the umpteenth time in a row - by Sandgorse, heading out for his morning visit to the dirtplace. It barely hurt anymore; she was far too used to it, and satisfied herself with snuggling up to Palebird,

trying to get back to sleep. Her nightmares of Patchkit, Petalkit, and Larchkit stopped completely when Larkwing joined StarClan, and Mapleshine was delighting in the peace of her dreams - when she wasn't yanked from them by the irritable Sandgorse, of course.

She couldn't find rest again, even in Palebird, and slowly sat up with a quiet sigh, taking a deep breath. The air outside was cold, but leaf-fall was taking the forest; fortunately, just yesterday, she and Dawnstripe, with the company of Tallpaw and Barkpaw, stumbled on some fresh comfrey near the border, and quickly snapped it up for Hawkheart; they'd been having plenty of luck lately finding other such herbs for him, and it was reassuring to know that they had stock if the Clan fell into danger. When the cold came in again, they'd be ready.

Tallpaw was doing amazingly in his training, too. Mapleshine couldn't keep up with him anymore - granted, she couldn't keep up with any WindClan cat - and he was still a little slower with his training than the others, but his progress when he tried was awe-inspiring. He had yet to see his first battle - *fortunately* - but he seemed to have a string of victories when training against Shrewpaw that made her glow with pride and vindication.

Serves him right for being a brat and using his claws!

Yawning, she carefully made her way out into camp. Maybe today, she'd hold another race with him - or let him have an easy day. He caught an amazing, plump pigeon yesterday... Maybe not, though. Thunder rolled in the sky, and she looked up as the first droplets of rain began to come down. Unease washed over her with the presence of the oncoming storm, and she gazed up at the sky worriedly.

Suddenly, a familiar scent crossed her nose, and she froze outside the warriors' den, opening her mouth. Her heart lurched when she realized what it was.

ThunderClan!

Right as it crossed her mind, there was a screech from the tunnel. Her fur spiked as ThunderClan warriors surged into the camp, and

she leapt away from them, giving herself only a moment to call out to her Clan.

"ThunderClan raid!"

As soon as she called out the warning, a strong warrior bowled her over, and she tumbled across the clearing, tangled in a ball with him. She couldn't help a grin, kicking his belly with her hindpaws and pushing upwards with a sudden surge of strength that made him squawk like a bird.

I bet you weren't expecting your own strength, were you?

She was the advantage in this fight. ThunderClan had come expecting to fight with lanky, delicate moor-runners; not their own blood. Pausing, she watched the chaos break out as her previous fighter fled. She could recognize only a few of the warriors, remembering them as apprentices or new names. Pinestar was there, leading the fight; Hareflight met him evenly, swiping at his face. And there, a warrior she'd known as a kit - Dapplekit, that was it. Though, most of them were new faces, and a small part of her heart twinged with pain.

How many battles has ThunderClan been in, that barely any of the warriors I remember are fighting today?

She pulled her attention away from the fray as the apprentices bolted from their dens. Tallpaw raced up to her as soon as he saw her, and she didn't waste a moment, protecting him with her body.

"Go guard the nursery," She instructed. "I'll send Palebird to help you."

She watched him streak away before growling and launching into the battle again. She leapt onto the back of a large gray warrior, sinking her teeth in and ignoring his screech. Dapplesomething yowled in return, and she felt herself dragged off by her claws. When she spun to face her, there was a flash of recognition in her eyes - *my scent*, Mapleshine figured - but she barely had time to acknowledge it before the gray warrior from before charged into her, beating at her with a yowl. She fought back twice as hard,

headbutting him in the chest hard enough to wind him and throwing him off. Dapplesomething could keep fighting, for now. She was preoccupied with Aspenfall, anyway.

Heatherstar had joined the battle. She watched her surge after Sunfall - that name, she knew - while she scrabbled up onto the Hunting Stones, panting. It'd been too long since her last real battle.

At least Tallpaw's kept me in shape!

She was distracted, quickly, by a silver cat she didn't recognize darting into the medicine den. Very suddenly, her heart lurched. *The herbs!*

"Hawkheart!" She screeched, spotting him at the edge of the fight. His head swivelled towards her, eyes wide. "Someone's in the medicine den!"

Immediately, he charged into it, and she followed as two more ThunderClan warriors charged after. She felt Appledawn on one side, Sandgorse on the other; together, they quickly hauled out the supporting warriors, synchronizing their attack and driving them back into the tunnel. Sandgorse met Mapleshine's eyes, and they shared a nod before he darted off again. Just behind her, there was a thud, and she spun in time to see the silver cat - a gorgeous molly, heavy with ThunderClan and herb-scent - hit the ground, thrown by Hawkheart. He leapt atop her afterwards, ripping into the molly with teeth and claws.

Something about this felt wrong. As he sunk his teeth into the molly's throat, Mapleshine's gut twisted, and she sensed a great pain outside of camp. Acting on her impulse, she grabbed Hawkheart by the scruff and shoulders with her teeth and claws, hauling him off. He swung to face her with a growl, only afterwards realizing it was her and looking confused.

"Mapleshine..."

"You're a medicine cat, Hawkheart," She growled. "And even if you weren't, you have no need to kill to win this battle. Let her be."

"Hawkheart! Start healing our wounded!"

Heatherstar's shriek rang out across camp, and both Hawkheart and Mapleshine swivelled their heads to look at her before looking back to each other, tense.

"I'll help. Just tell me what needs to be done."

A few of the herbs were entirely shredded and scattered. Mapleshine felt her heart sink as she gazed at the comfrey she'd brought yesterday, torn to pieces on the floor. Fortunately, it seemed they'd all been able to act fast enough, and most of the store was undamaged. Aspenfall limped in, a gash torn into his shoulder; Hawkheart quickly directed her. The formula was almost always the same; marigold juice, burdock pulp, tight cobweb, repeat. Only the worst-injured warriors stayed in the den, others charging back out after getting their light patch-up to deal with ThunderClan.

Finally, after what felt like forever, Pinestar's call caught Mapleshine's ears.

"ThunderClan! Retreat!"

She shared a glance with Hawkheart, nodding once before padding out with him, into camp. Most warriors darted back out through the tunnel, but some stayed behind, collecting their wounded and standing with Pinestar by the entrance. Heatherstar stalked forth to meet him, hissing.

"This attack was unjust. StarClan would have never let you win."

Pinestar was quiet. Mapleshine fixed him with a hard stare, then looked to Heatherstar, remembering the leader's words on the day of Larkwing's death.

"He seems kind enough, but I worry, sometimes, that he will be misguided, blinded by StarClan's light."

Did Heatherstar know why they attacked the herb store? *Did StarClan warn you of this?*

"Take your wounded, and leave."

She watched Heatherstar stand her ground. Pinestar dipped his head, and wounded ThunderClanners began to filter out. Mapleshine watched them go for a moment before flicking her gaze to the silver cat. She still lay unmoving, small puddles of blood staining the ground underneath her. *She walks with StarClan now.*

"Moonflower! Moonflower!"

An apprentice's cry pulled Mapleshine's attention away, and she watched a little blue cat sprint up to the body of the molly, nudging her desperately. "It's me, Bluepaw!" She was gazing into the dead cat's eyes, hoping to find something there. Mapleshine's heart wrenched.

She's barely out of the nursery!

"Why won't she get up?"

"She's dead, Bluepaw."

Bluepaw wailed, and Mapleshine swallowed, fighting the urge to rush over and comfort her. "She can't be! We were fighting warriors, not loners or rogues! Warriors don't kill for no reason!"

It wasn't for no reason, The molly sighed, about to walk away before she spotted Hawkheart glowering at Bluepaw. Her eyes flashed. *Don't you dare. You just killed her mother.*

"She tried to destroy our medicine supply," He snarled. "That was reason enough."

"But StarClan told us to do it!" Bluepaw looked from Hawkheart to Pinestar, desperate for justification. "We had no choice. They told us to, didn't they? Goosefeather said so!"

"You risked so much on the word of Goosefeather?" Hawkheart snorted, turning and stalking away. Mapleshine glared after him, only just barely registering Bluepaw's final words of confusion when Pinestar hauled Moonflower on his back.

"What does he mean? ... Oh, Moonflower, please wake up... It was all a mistake! You don't have to be dead..."

She kept her eyes on Bluepaw as she followed another molly out of camp, Pinestar trailing just ahead of them. When the last ThunderClan cat left the camp, Heatherstar turned and leapt onto the Tallrock, looking down on her Clan.

"We were lucky not to lose any warriors," She called. "Those who are injured, go to Hawkheart. I'm personally going to lead an additional herb-hunting patrol at sunhigh. We need to make up what we've lost."

Mapleshine listened to her for a moment before stalking towards the medicine den, anger festering in her heart. She set her eyes on Hawkheart as she entered, prepared to tear into him - but stopped at his hunched-over look, softening her gaze when he turned.

"I didn't mean to kill her," He murmured, voice quieter than Mapleshine had ever heard it. "If I had known, I'd -"

"You were defending the Clan," she responded, her anger forgotten as she rushed to his side, offering comfort. *I couldn't reassure Bluepaw, but I can be here for you.*

"Larkwing used to help me control my anger." He pressed his face into Mapleshade's shoulder. "I saw Moonflower ripping up the herbs, and I... I saw Moonflower attacking her. I couldn't just let her kill Larkwing. Not after all that."

The tortoiseshell shut her eyes. *Of course you would see it that way. Poor Hawkheart...* "You did what you had to to protect us. The death was regrettable, but nobody could blame you for that."

He looked down, and she opened her eyes to meet his gaze. His were glossed over with grief and regret, an expression he would never let an everyday cat see. Mapleshine was glad he trusted her so much.

"Perhaps you should visit the Moonstone tonight. Talk to Larkwing. For now, our Clan needs you."

Her tail-tip drifted under his chin, and he nodded, taking a deep breath and blinking away his sadness in favour of heading into the

store, beginning to gather herbs. Mapleshine watched him go, taking a deep breath of her own and pushing past the wounded filing in carefully, back into the open air. The rain had stopped, but the sky didn't clear, leaving the moor overcast. She didn't mind, quickly making her way across camp to check in on Tallpaw and Palebird.

***

"The infection's healing. He could probably start training again today."

"Thank you, Hawkheart."

Battle after battle. That was all the Clan had seen. First ThunderClan, then ShadowClan, then Sandgorse had gotten himself killed - and, on top of it, Tallpaw had fallen ill. Even a quarter moon later, after regular visits - it seemed like Mapleshine was the only one who wanted to visit him - he was angry and sick. *I don't blame him. I remember feeling that way, for much longer. If only Larkwing were here to heal him, too...*

She could tell Hawkheart was thinking the same, and opted to change the subject as they shared tongues, offering a soft purr.

"Hopkit, Sorrelkit and Pigeonkit have been healthy. Meadowslip is enamoured."

"I'm glad. I hope Hopkit's injury won't get in the way of his training," Hawkheart murmured. Mapleshine flicked her tail.

"A little twisted foot never hurt any cat. I'm sure he'll do fine."

There was a lull in the conversation, and she looked down as Hawkheart stared at her.

"Mapleshine. You can probably fool Palebird and the rest of the Clan, but you can't fool me. You're hurt."

"I can't force him to train as a moor runner," Mapleshine sighed, looking up again. "I'm no better than Sandgorse was, if I did."

Hawkheart dipped his head, and they looked up at Heatherstar's yowl, standing up with soft sighs. Tallpaw darted out into the clearing, obviously eager and expecting the new mentorship announcement from her. As the Clan gathered, Heatherstar forced herself to take a deep breath. Mapleshine's ears flattened.

She has something else in mind.

"Meadowslip's kits have brought new life into our Clan," The leader started. "Let us pray that Hopkit, Sorrelkit, and Pigeonkit grow into strong and healthy warriors."

She listened to the murmurs of approval wash through the Clan, and kept her eyes on Heatherstar. The pale gray molly seemed to catch Tallpaw's eye, and she saw her form tense up.

"... WindClan, you have known for some time now I have my doubts about tunneling," She continued, hesitant. A few cats murmured around her, but Mapleshine ignored them, her fur slowly rising as she felt the tension start to crackle. "Tallpaw has asked to train as a tunneler. I can only admire his loyalty to the memory of his father. Sandgorse's death shook us all, and we will grieve him for many more moons to come. Tallpaw's wish to learn the skills that led to his father's death shows true courage."

Mapleshine saw him stand up. *No. No, no, no.*

"However. I have thought long and hard... And I've decided that there will be no more tunneling in WindClan."

Tallpaw stopped cold. Mapleshine felt her blood turn to ice.

"This is not a decision I take lightly, but I hope most of you will support me."

Cries of objection started to ring out, but Heatherstar raised her tail for silence. Tallpaw remained unmoving.

"We do not need the tunnels. Prey has run aboveground for many moons. We have improved our hunting skills and learned to work in teams." Her gaze flicked to Mapleshine. "Even in the harshest weather, we have been able to catch our prey aboveground.

WindClan's tunnelling skills have served us well for countless moons, but a new dawn is coming. Our moor-running skills are more important. We have enemies to fight aboveground, and we must fight them. We cannot hide in our tunnels, and hope they will go away. We must train hard, and become warriors who can rival any Clan!" Her muzzle lifted high, and she spoke with a newfound enthusiasm. "It will take time and effort, but we will become stronger than WindClan has ever been! In the moons to come, other Clans will fear us."

The Clan broke out in an argument, but it was slowly silenced by the tunnelers who agreed that the losses were too great. Chants of WindClan rang out; Mapleshine tuned them out, watching Palebird approach Tallpaw - *She hasn't done that much recently. She's felt too much grief.* - before he turned and sprinted out of camp, looking furious. Thunder rolled again.

Mapleshine lost herself again, and streaked out of camp after him. She stopped on the rise just out of camp, tasting the air; rainfall, and... There! His scent trail!

She was vaguely aware of Hareflight and Shrewpaw following her, their pawsteps thundering behind her as she followed Tallpaw's scent; she sprung over a hill just in time to see him diving into a hole, and snatched his tail in her teeth with a hiss, hauling him out as rain began to come down heavily.

"Oh, no you don't!"

Tallpaw rolled on the ground roughly when she pulled him out, hissing at him. "You heard Heatherstar! The tunnels are off-limits, and I'll be damned before I let you meet the same fate as your father!"

"I don't care!" Tallpaw screeched. "I don't care what Heatherstar says! I don't care what the Clan thinks!"

Mapleshine snarled, lashing her tail. "Don't you disrespect your Clan like that! Heatherstar has decided you're to be a moor runner, whether you like it or not!"

The apprentice hissed as Hareflight and Shrewpaw caught up. "Is he okay?"

"Poor Tallpaw. Won't Heatherstar let you become a wormpaw? Why not go down there, anyway? You know you were born to live underground."

Mapleshine snapped, pushing the apprentice back. "Hareflight, control your apprentice for once! This has gone beyond teasing, and I've half a mind to shred his ears!"

But Hareflight wasn't listening, instead choosing to pace around Tallpaw. "Why did you leave in the middle of the meeting? You worried everyone."

"Nobody's worried about me. I killed Brackenwing." He shot a glance to Shrewpaw, searing and hot. The other apprentice snarled. "Remember?"

"The visitors will think we can't control our apprentices!"

"Who cares what a bunch of rogues think? If they had any sense of honor, they'd have left after they killed Sandgorse!"

"Mind your tongue!" Mapleshine hissed, jumping when Shrewpaw pounced on Tallpaw with a shriek of anger.

"You're a hare-brained embarrassment to WindClan, with all your stupid accusations! Nobody likes you! You *should* be underground! None of us would miss you!"

Tallpaw was quick to respond to the challenge, and they tussled for a moment. Hareflight only watched in shock, and Mapleshine felt anger pulse under her pelt. *How dare he. How dare he!*

She launched herself at the apprentices, grabbing Shrewpaw by the scruff and tossing him off Tallpaw a little rougher than she meant to; she was quick to swat him over the head before he could jump back up, leaving him cowering in shame.

"Hareflight has been too soft on you," She spat, ears pinned back as she glared down the apprentice. "And Brackenwing would be

ashamed of you. This harassment has gone long enough. Go back to camp."

Her gaze flicked to Hareflight.

"Both of you."

Hareflight opened his mouth, but closed it shortly after, nodding respectfully to her; after the display, he seemed to know better than to argue with her, and led the trembling Shrewpaw back towards camp. Taking a deep breath, Mapleshine turned back to Tallpaw, softening slightly as he stared at the ground, sitting awkwardly due to his wounds. She marched up to him and gave him a slightly softer cuff over the head - he still flinched from it, and looked up with a mix of shame and anger, and she sighed.

I know. I know more than you understand.

"You're not off scot-free either," She muttered. "I know you're mad about Heatherstar's decision, and hellbent on the idea that Sparrow killed Sandgorse, but that does not excuse your behaviour. Now, you and I are going to gather some wool for the elders, run off that steam boiling in your veins, and you'll go see Hawkheart about those scratches. I don't want to delay your training again because of another infection. Do I make myself clear?"

Tallpaw nodded wordlessly, and she nudged him with a sigh, feeling the rain starting to ease up as he bolted towards the sheep. She ran after him, closing her eyes and hoping, desperately, that things would get better again soon.

Chapter 5

-- Ch. 5

Exile.

It takes your mind, again.

"Really? You... You want me?"

Palebird and Mapleshine shared a look, amused, and Palebird nodded.

"Only if you're willing. You used to be close with Sandgorse - we trust you."

"Well, okay.. But someone should tell Tallpaw."

"I'll tell him," Mapleshine offered. "Hopefully the news will cheer him up. The assessment this morning was rough -"

"What news?"

Mapleshine jumped, spinning to face Tallpaw as he appeared in the nursery entrance. She glanced to Palebird and Woollytail. The molly she loved looked overjoyed, but Woollytail was nervous. *Reasonably so.*

"Tallpaw," She started. "Palebird and I have been talking for some time, and... We've decided, we're going to try and have kits."

His eyes flashed. There seemed to be some happiness there, but it was guarded. "But you're both mollies," He murmured. Mapleshine nodded, feeling a little more nervous and taking a deep breath.

"That's why Woollytail is here. He... He agreed to help us. Palebird wants to carry."

Ah, there's the anger. Tallpaw's claws dug into the ground, and he hissed at Woollytail. "What about Sandgorse? You were his friend! How could you just -"

Woollytail ducked his head away awkwardly, and Palebird jumped to his defense. "Sandgorse agreed to help me carry you and Finchkit, before Mapleshine ever came to camp, and Woollytail supported him. He agreed to be the backup, if Sandgorse turned up... Barren. He trusted him, and we're trusting him now."

Mapleshine skirted closer, nudging the 'paw reassuringly. "You'll always be her first kit," She murmured, relishing in the faint surprise in Tallpaw's eyes. *I've earned the right to call myself your mother, and I'm proud to be one!* "But, StarClan willing, you shouldn't be her last."

Tallpaw hesitated, glancing between them before sighing softly and nodding. "If... If it makes you happy."

He turned to pad off with that, and Mapleshine drooped in relief, turning to Palebird and pressing their heads together before looking to Woollytail.

"If you two are ready, now's your time to try. Tallpaw's naming ceremony will be happening soon, though - that's what Heatherstar said, anyway. I need to go make sure he stays out of trouble."

The tom nodded, and Mapleshine parted ways, darting out of the nursery to chase down Tallpaw; Cloudrunner had done the job already, however, calling him over. Mapleshine hurried over, puffed up with pride as she made her way towards Heatherstar. *After all your struggles, you earned this!*

"Leaf-bare is coming, but we will face it with two new warriors!"

Woollytail and Palebird hurried out from the nursery, eager to support Tallpaw. *They'll have time to try later.* She eyed her apprentice - her *son* - with pride, purring as he settled next to Shrewpaw and Barkpaw, just before Heatherstar.

"Shrewpaw, your warrior name will be Shrewclaw, in honor of your

skill at hunting and fighting. You've trained well, and you're worthy of your warrior name. Barkpaw, I name you Barkwing, in honor of your mother - just like her, your patience and ferocity is admired. And, Tallpaw," She purred, shifting her gaze to the black-and-white tom, "Your father always meant to name you for your long tail, and so, I give you your name in honor of him. Talltail, one day you will be a greater warrior than you can even imagine. Sandgorse would be proud."

The Clan erupted in cheers for the two warriors, and Mapleshine watched her son with pride, but he looked so very distant. Something in her chest shifted at the look. *What are you thinking about?*

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Mapleshine was confused when she returned from hunting to find the camp bustling with activity. Carrying her rabbit to the fresh-kill pile, she dropped it, looking around in confusion for a moment before flagging down Lilywhisker. "Hey, what's going on? What did I miss?"

"Oh, Mapleshine," She murmured, "I'm so sorry. Talltail left."

Something inside her shattered. "What?"

"He left WindClan," She repeated. "He said he was leaving for good, and Heatherstar just... Let him go."

"No," She gasped. "No, no... How - how long ago did he leave?" *I have to catch up! I didn't even get to say goodbye!*

"Just a few moments ago," Lilywhisker responded. "Barkwing left with him."

She didn't hesitate for another moment, turning and pelting back out the way she came, gasping softly to herself as she went. She paused upon almost slamming into Barkwing, looking at him in shock while his pelt bristled.

"Where's Talltail?"

"He just crossed the border a minute ago," Barkwing replied, features softening with sympathy. "I saw him there myself."

"Take me," She breathed, and Barkwing dipped his head, leading the way at a full sprint. Finally, they drew to a stop atop the ridge, and Mapleshine heaved as she watched Talltail; he was barely more than a blurry shape in the grass, running wild and free. He looked happier than he had in moons. Even so, a part of her felt as though she'd been attacked by a badger, and she sank to her belly, choking on a sob.

You took away my first three, and now you take away my fourth?

Barkwing trailed his tail over her spine, trying to be reassuring. "It wasn't your fault," He murmured, watching her carefully. "He's been talking about going for a long time, and... Well, StarClan gave me a sign today."

Mapleshine closed her eyes, ignoring the wild notion of a warrior getting a sign from StarClan. "So everyone wanted him to leave after all?"

"No," Barkwing snorted. "You should have seen the fuss everyone kicked up over his leave. Even Shrewclaw was sad. And, you and I are here, watching him go. That must count for something."

She lifted her head, opening her eyes again. Talltail had disappeared. She picked herself up, taking a deep breath and looking to Barkwing with a faint smile. "Have I ever told you that you'd make a good medicine cat?" Everything about him - even his posture - reminded her of Larkwing. He chuckled, giving his chest a few licks.

"Actually, I was going to ask Heatherstar if she could apprentice me to Hawkheart when we got back to camp."

"Well! What are we waiting for, then?" She put forth a grin, swallowing her grief and standing up to walk home with Barkwing. Talltail had made his choice; at least she could rest knowing he was still alive, and happy. Until then, she had a Clan to tend to.

The tunnel snagged on her pelt when she re-entered, and she sighed happily as she gazed across the camp. Palebird and Lilywhisker talked calmly together; Palebird's belly was swollen, and it wouldn't be long now before their kits arrived. Barkwing steered away to pick at some fresh-kill, and Mapleshine stretched. *Everything is well.*

"Mapleshine!"

She perked up at Heatherstar's meow, sauntering over quickly to meet her with full attention.

"Have you heard about Talltail?"

"Yes," Mapleshine swallowed her pain. "Barkwing took me up to the ridge."

She dipped her head. "I'm sorry."

"We couldn't have stopped him," The tortie reasoned, and Heatherstar smiled, beckoning her down into the Meeting Hollow. They sat there together, and Heatherstar took a breath.

"Reedfeather is retiring soon."

She blinked in surprise. "Really?" She hadn't noticed the warrior aging at all, though he had been deputy since before Mapleshine arrived in WindClan. *Deputies usually aren't so lucky to make it that long - especially after all the battles in camp we've seen.* "I suppose he deserves the rest."

"Indeed." Heatherstar's eyes shone. "I'll need a new deputy in his place, though. Life doesn't stop for one cat."

"Of course."

There was a pause, and Mapleshine fidgeted a little before Heatherstar continued. "Mapleshine, you've proven yourself a trustworthy and loyal cat."

Mapleshine chuckled, nervous. "I still haven't been to a gathering, since I joined WindClan."

"This is true," She murmured, voice soft. "I've been afraid of how RiverClan and ThunderClan would react, even under new leadership. Bitterness doesn't fade easily."

The warrior swallowed and nodded, remembering the last gathering she'd observed. She could still hear the angered cries, silenced only by the clouds covering the moon.

"But I think enough time has passed. Besides," Heatherstar purred, "You're one of the only other warriors I've ever spoken to in true confidence. I can trust you - WindClan can trust you. Will you be my deputy, Mapleshine?"

Her heart lurched. For a moment, Mapleshine's life flashed before her eyes, everything from her kithood to now. *Are my kits watching in StarClan?*

"Yes," She said after a long moment, looking Heatherstar in the eyes. "I will be honored to serve this Clan as your deputy, Heatherstar." The two purred for a moment, happy to have it settled, before Mapleshine remembered something suddenly. *Barkwing!* "My first act as deputy should be to tell you about Barkwing, though..."

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The den was crowded as Palebird moaned, leaning on Mapleshine with her claws digging into the moss. Mapleshine kept herself pressed close, lapping at her head with loud purrs. Hawkheart and Barkwing were at the ready, and Mapleshine pressed a paw against Palebird's belly, just as she had during the first birth.

"You're doing great, love," She murmured, pressing her muzzle into the black-and-white molly's cheek. Palebird simply responded with another moan, and Mapleshine stifled a laugh. *She'll be fine.*

"First one!" Hawkheart lifted up the freed, squealing kit, passing it to Barkwing. The apprentice started to lap it clean. It was a little dilute tortie molly, and it squeaked constantly under the bombardment, struggling away from his tongue. He pressed it to Palebird's belly just in time for Hawkheart to free the second kit.

This one was a little red tabby molly, livelier and noiser than the first.

"That one's just like Talltail, remember?" Mapleshine purred, keeping herself close to Palebird. "He was just as lively when Larkwing delivered him."

Palebird's eyes shone, and she smiled around her panting. "I remember," She purred, groaning as the last one struggled out of her. "She'll make an amazing warrior, just like him."

"Last one!"

The final kit broke free, and Hawkheart took care of him himself. "This one's a tom," He purred. Mapleshine craned her neck to look at him; a little orange kit, his fur shining bright as fire. Palebird slumped against her mate, panting.

"I'll get some borage to help with your milk," Barkwing told Palebird, dipping out of the den. Mapleshine purred her gratitude, leaning against the tired molly.

"Oh, what shall we name them, dearest?"

Palebird pushed herself up, summoning her strength to look at the kits with love and adoration. "I want to name her Finchkit," She murmured, her tail drifting over the red tabby. "She looks almost exactly like her."

Mapleshine nodded. Her own tail drifted over the tortie, sighing. "Let's name this one Larkkit," she purred. "After Larkwing."

"That's a lovely name."

They pressed their heads together, then set their eyes on the tom. After a moment's thought, Mapleshine purred.

"What do you think about Firekit?"

There was a pause, and Palebird flopped back, purring. "It suits him perfectly," She slurred. "He looks just like fire..."

The deputy laughed softly, snuggling up to her mate and looking to Hawkheart gratefully. "Thank you, Hawkheart."

He dipped his head and made to leave, only to stop as Barkwing re-entered; he had no herbs on him, but his eyes glittered with joy. "Talltail is back!"

The medicine cat was quick to try and shush him, but Mapleshine's fur spiked, and she made to get up; Palebird shifted with a curious murmur, and she dipped her head down again, running a few laps of her tongue over the exhausted queen. "You rest, dearest. I'll tell you everything when I get back." Palebird relaxed again, and Mapleshine stepped around her, hurrying after Hawkheart and Barkwing. In the clearing, Heatherstar stood by Talltail, looking happy to have him back, and a large hawk sat on the fresh-kill pile.

Sorrelpaw and Pigeonpaw hopped around her paws.

"Talltail saved Hoppaw!" Sorrelpaw exclaimed, looking up excitedly. "We went out of camp and looked in a rabbit hole and a hawk came by and Talltail rescued Hoppaw and killed the hawk!"

Mapleshine's mind reeled, and she barely processed the paws' disobedience. She was too focused on Talltail, too focused on rushing over and covering his head with licks.

"I didn't get to say goodbye," She choked. "You left without saying goodbye."

"I'm here now," He purred. "And I'm here to stay."

She pressed her head into his shoulder, taking a deep breath and absorbing his scent. "You'll have to tell me everything," She breathed, "but you need to meet your siblings, first."

StarClan has blessed us today!

Chapter 6

-- Ch. 6

Vilify.

Don't even try.

The vigil had been long and painful. The whole Clan was shaken to it's core. After a long, final year of struggle and new warriors (Talltail had proven to be a great mentor to Deadfoot, and the warrior was now admired in the Clan), Heatherstar had succumbed to greencough. As the elders carried her body out of camp, Mapleshine turned her head to Talltail.

"You're in charge while we're gone," She told him. "And if you find yourself in doubt, ask Barkwing." To Hawkheart, she smiled and stretched. "Are you ready for one last journey?"

He'd spat the travelling herbs at her paws and snorted, shaking out his pelt. "It may be my last trip to the moonstone, but I will keep healing in Larkwing's honor until the day I die."

"I always admired your conviction, Hawkheart. I'm glad you're with me, still."

Touching noses with Palebird and each of her kits, she followed Hawkheart across the moor she'd come to love and call home, crossed the Thunderpath, and climbed the rocks. Mothermouth was a yawning grave, darkened evermore in the sunset, and she couldn't help a pause. Hawkheart blinked sympathetically.

"It's okay to be intimidated."

She took a deep breath. "Last time I was here, Talltail was a 'paw. StarClan didn't visit me with a message, that night." Hawkheart fixed her with a confused look, and her tail twitched. "But I saw

them. Cats without borders, fleeting and talking quietly. And then... A mother approached me. Daisytail - you know the story." She looked at him with a smile. "And I felt... Blessed. She showed me my kits. I did not speak to them, but I saw them, happily playing in a meadow, watched by queens from every Clan."

"You always did find solace with the queens," Hawkheart rumbled. She nodded, looking back to Mothermouth with a slow breath.

"Well, let's not keep StarClan waiting any longer."

Together, they descended into the dark tunnel, padding calmly along the twists and turns until the cavern opened before them. Mapleshine paused, taking in a deep breath just before moonlight spilled in, and the stone lit up brilliantly. She could never get over its wonder. After a brief glance to Hawkheart, deputy and medicine cat approached the stone, settling before it with their noses touching it. Sleep gripped Mapleshine violently, and she was yanked into darkness.

There was a long moment before her eyes opened, and she found herself in the same place she awoke in last time. A river rushed nearby. Before her lay a wide moor, and to one side of it, a dense forest lay. Towards the north, she saw the forest darken, and briefly wondered what lay in the darkness...

"Welcome, Mapleshine."

But a familiar voice pulled her from her thoughts, and she gasped in delight at the faces she saw.

"Larkwing! Heatherstar!"

Without thinking, she sprang forward to meet them, purring loudly and pushing into their pelts. They met her with joy, chests rumbling louder than thunder. They remained that way for only a few moments before pulling apart, leaving Mapleshine hopeful for what lay ahead.

"Are you ready?"

"Is any cat ever ready?"

Larkwing chuckled, and other starry cats circled around behind her, just out of Mapleshine's vision. The tortie took a deep breath as she approached, shutting her eyes as their noses touched.

"With this life, I give you patience. Use it well, to listen to the cats who need you most."

Mapleshine shuddered, feeling like cold water was running down her back. Behind her eyes, she saw flashes - some things, she remembered. Being in the medicine den with Larkwing, healing from her trauma. But she saw others, too, like Hawkheart being taught how to deal with his anger, or Heatherstar asking for advice. It was a slow agony, but it halted abruptly, just before it got unbearable, and she felt gratified. Larkwing pulled away after that moment, and Mapleshine looked up again. Now Heatherstar was stepping forth, tail waving.

"With this life," The grey molly purred, "I give you trust. Use it well, and trust in your Clanmates - and in yourself."

Once again, she was rocked with pain and a slew of Heatherstar's memories. Her leadership ceremony; speaking with Mothflight. Every moment where she felt unsure, and placed her trust in cats, trust that they would do the right thing - every apprentice's ceremony, every council with her high ranks, every talk with Talltail. The trip to RiverClan seemed to hang at the forefront of her mind; Mapleshine remembered that day. Deadfoot - at the time, Hopkit - was burning with infection, and Talltail and Barkwing had been trusted to go to RiverClan and retrieve sedge in hopes of saving him. It had worked - even though Heatherstar had been unsure. The dead leader pulled away, and Mapleshine gasped as the pain faded, replaced by a comforting warmth.

She looked up, slowly perking as she recognized the tom approaching. "... Sandgorse."

"A small part of me always thought I would give my son this life, rather than you."

She shared a chuckle with the tom, and he sat before her.

"I was hotheaded, back then. I didn't treat you, or Palebird, or Talltail with the respect or love you deserved." His eyes flashed. "I regret that every day."

"I don't regret scarring you," Mapleshine joked. Sandgorse laughed.

"No, I wouldn't expect you to. I deserved it. But, that's where your next life comes in." Leaning forward, he touched his nose to hers. "I give you a life of awareness. Use it to realize when your actions are harming others, and to keep from doing permanent damage." As Sandgorse's words echoed in her ears, she felt a sting across her face, and fought the urge to flinch away. She saw glimpses of his life; seeing the dead Finchkit, spitting and arguing, treating Talltail roughly. The last she saw was the tunnels collapsing around her, and she felt water fill her lungs. As it grew harder to breathe, she felt regret close around her heart like a fox's jaws, squeezing tighter and tighter as she thought of all the things she would never get to say. Then, it faded away, and she coughed and heaved a few times. When she looked up, a new cat stood in front of her, and she pulled herself upright.

"O... Oakstar?"

"Mapleshine."

The leader's eyes flashed with grief, and he dipped his head. "StarClan judged me harshly for the death of your kits. I let emotion cloud my judgement - a good leader never does such a thing." Mapleshine blinked, her ears folding as he looked up. "To you, I give a life of clarity. Use it so that you may judge fairly and within the warrior code; do not let your experiences taint your ability to be fair." When they touched noses, Mapleshine staggered, getting hit very suddenly with grief; it was a grief she recognized all too well. She remembered when Appledusk killed Oakstar's son at Sunningrocks. She felt his grief and anger as she saw herself then, through his eyes, a traitor with the children of his son's murderer. She understood and sympathized, now, and felt regret when Oakstar opened his eyes to StarClan, immediately faced with not only his son, but the kits he had banished. His son turned his back on him, and the kits were soon to follow, their disappointment unimaginably present from their eyes.

Mapleshine didn't realize she was crying until the vision stopped, and paused to shake the tears from her eyes, taking a few deep breaths to calm herself. *That's four lives.*

When she was able to focus, Brackenwing stood before her, looking amused. "Are you going to be alright?"

"I am now," She breathed, smiling at the queen. "It's good to see you. How is Shrewclaw?"

"He's well," She purred. "Vindictive as always. I'm afraid he doesn't have a life for you."

"His loss," Mapleshine grinned, leaning forth to meet the chuckling warrior.

"With this life, I give you courage. No matter what may lie ahead, you must be brave enough to face it with your head held high, even if you face death itself." Screeching surrounded her, and for once, Mapleshine saw no memories. It was just battle all around her. A cat of shadows sprung at her from the fray, but somehow, she was ready, rolling with it cleanly and fighting it off. Her pelt stung from the scars, and she could feel herself bleeding; but it was distant; all her mind could focus on was defending her Clan. Then, it cleared, and Mapleshine was left rejuvenated as Brackenwing backed away into the mist.

Five. I miss you, Brackenwing, even though we didn't get along at first.

There was a bit of a silence, and she glanced over her shoulder to Hawkheart. He dipped his head reassuringly, tail remaining curled around his paws. When she looked back, her heart lurched.

"Appledusk!"

Appledusk looked different from the other StarClan cats. Scars on his body looked fresh and seemed to constantly bleed, and his form shimmered with red and black instead of the brilliant white and blue.

"Mapleshine," He rasped. "I can't be here for very long. I belong elsewhere - that was the judgement StarClan lay upon me. But our

children - I kept in touch with them from the border. They've told me everything." There was a pause, and Mapleshine's brow furrowed. *He reeks of fear-scent.* "When I found out you were becoming leader, I - I begged to cross over. I had to give you a life."

She sniffed. "What is it, then?"

Appledusk shut his eyes, and touched her nose. "I give you a life of honesty," He rumbled. "I was a traitorous fool. I betrayed my Clan, I betrayed the code, and I betrayed you, all because I was never honest about my actions. Do not damn yourself as I have."

Mapleshine felt as though she were climbing loose stones. Every time she put a paw down, the ground was unsteady, and she feared it would not hold her. Finally, it gave out from underneath, and she fell back down the cliff, stones clawing up her pelt and making her shriek in pain and fear as the ground grew closer and closer, faster and faster -

She jolted back to StarClan just before hitting the ground, eyes wide. Appledusk was gone. Panting with fear, she forced her fur to settle, sitting upright.

Six. I'm glad you learned your lesson, Appledusk. I don't think I'll ever truly forgive you, though.

Another pause. Mapleshine shuffled her paws, then perked up at three tiny shapes, and let herself fall down. All the other cats who had given her lives - save for Appledusk - had gathered behind them, but she barely noticed, too focused on the kits before her.

"Patchkit," She croaked. "Petalkit. Larchkit."

"Actually," Patchkit chimed, "StarClan gave us warrior names! I'm Patchpounce!"

"I'm Petalwhistle," Chimed her daughter.

"And they called me Larchfeather!" Her third kit finished. Mapleshine felt nothing but delight and pride, even with the anguish twisting her heart.

"I'm so sorry, my loves..." She choked. "You died too young, because of my foolishness."

They rushed up to her, surrounding her and purring loudly. "You don't need to apologize," Petalwhistle purred. "You did what you thought was best. But we each have a life for you now!"

They pulled away. Mapleshine remained laying down, if only to allow them ease of access. Patchpounce touched her nose first. "With this life, I give you vindication. Know that your judgement is always, and was always, correct." This life was refreshing, and, once again, Mapleshine saw no memories; she only felt a rush of satisfaction, as though she was being proven correct with every movement. It faded slowly, and Larchfeather was next, pressing up to her with a purr.

"With this life, I give you acceptance. Don't let your mistakes haunt you; what happened happened. You cannot change what you've done in the past. Only look toward the future." The jaws of regret from Sandgorse's life suddenly clutched her again, but began to relieve itself, leaving her gasping and heaving gratefully. She looked into the horizon with hope, watching the sun rise on a new day. *A new chance to make up for my mistakes.*

As the sunlight faded, she found herself facing Petalwhistle, and took a deep breath. "For your final life," the kit smiled, "I give you justice. Do not let any death or misdeed go unavenged; but also use this to protect those in need and innocent." Mapleshine gasped as they touched noses, and she was rocked with the most violent and intense sensation yet. She felt the weight of the world on her shoulders, but it was slowly chipping away and becoming lighter and lighter with every move, and only one thought in her mind was clear; *I will see justice delivered!*

Finally, it faded, and Mapleshine took a moment to recover. Now she looked up and made out the faces of very cat who gave her a life, excluding Appledusk, and held the image - the view of their gazes of approval, forgiveness, and love - close to her heart as she spoke.

"I promise, to all of you," She murmured, "I will use your strength

and support to lead WindClan and make it the best it can be. I will give my life nine times over for the Clan that allowed me a second chance; I promise, I will not let you down."

Heatherstar's eyes shone. "We are proud of you, and we give to you your new name, Maplestar. Go well, lead strongly - and never forget that you are supported."

Maplestar's head reeled as the gathered cats cheered her name, echoing loudly around her; "Maplestar! Maplestar! Maplestar!"

It slowly faded out, as did the rest of the world, until it was all black - except for one thing. When she turned, she spotted Larkwing, looking troubled. Maplestar approached her. "What is it? Why haven't I woken up?"

"The coming moons will test you, Maplestar," Larkwing answered, her voice soft. "You have lost so much already, but you must be prepared to lose more." Mapleshine's heart sank for a moment, only for her blood to turn to ice at the medicine cat's next words; "Fire alone will save the Clans."

She jolted awake with a gasp after that, and Hawkheart hurried over to her side. "Are you alright?"

There was a long silence from Maplestar. Immediately, her thoughts drifted to little Firekit back home, safely curled up against Palebird's belly with Finchkit and Larkkit at his side. *Fire alone will save the Clans.*

"Maplestar?"

She looked up, and smiled. "Everything is fine, Hawkheart." She glanced up through the gap in the ceiling. The moon was gone, and she could see the sky begin to brighten. "Let's go home so you can rest those old bones."

She paused one last time as they left Mothermouth, looking out over the territories and taking a deep breath. She didn't know what was coming, or how her family was involved - but she was ready for anything, with the wind at her back and her Clanmates at her side.

WindClan is my home, and it always will be. She glanced to the sky with a final smile. *Thank you, for believing in me when no one else would.*

Retrospective Author's Notes

Hi there! My name is Razeru. First of all, thank you very much for reading my story!

I think, if you've read this, you can surmise that I love Mapleshade. She's grown to be one of my favourite characters in Warrior Cats; her story, narratively, is written the best - in my opinion - out of most of the super editions and novellas.

Keep in mind, these words are coming from someone who grew up with these books, and also gets big mad about the things the Erins have pulled on other characters, like Squirrelflight (specifically Squilf, actually. They keep doing my girl dirty, and I'm so angry).

I took a read through my story again recently, and passed through the comments both on this Wattpad copy of the story, and the AO3 mirror. I really and truly appreciate all the love, but some people did seem to misunderstand the intention behind some things in my story, so I feel like I owe a bit of an explanation to you, my readers.

I offer this explanation because I've chosen to abandon the MapleWind AU entirely. There's too much in retrospect that I'm unhappy with, too many story ideas that don't connect narratively - it just makes a poor story. So, this is basically a big spoiler chapter for what would have happened, if I continued.

The remainder of this "chapter" is just going to be me giving a word vomit about this story, so feel free to skip down to the bottom if you're only curious about closing remarks or projects surrounding other upcoming warriors works.

Alright. First and foremost, I want to address something specific. Mapleshade's story, as it was in canon, is a multidimensional story that a lot of people see as black-and-white. I, personally, see it as a fantastic narrative where not a single character is in the right, at

least not in the context of the Clans - or morally, in some cases. This being said, a lot of the arguments about Mapleshade are usually "she's absolutely terrible and deserved what she got" / "she did absolutely nothing wrong and everyone else should be suffering" - both of which are... Very, very dangerous views to take on any person or character. When I wrote Maplestar's Light, my intention was to explore the idea where a few cats stepped out of the norm that seemed to affect this specific generation of the Clans and offered sanctuary.

WindClan has always felt like the most lax Clan out of the four, to me. With their history of welcoming in strangers and making kindly bargains with the other Clans in their times of need, it made sense to me that if a wandering cat passed out on their territory, they would reach out and help them. I chose Heatherstar specifically for this story because she was such a revolutionary, and wasn't afraid to shoot down any cat's words if she felt someone was going to get hurt.

Moreover, this AU explores the idea that instead of sleeping in Myler's barn and then going on her rampage, Mapleshade simply collapsed into grief - so Ravenwing, Frecklewish, and Appledusk all survive. Temporarily.

While Mapleshade is taken into WindClan, Mapleshade's kits are restless, and it's their turn to be angry - assuming StarClan spirits know everything (and it's heavily implied, in the first series, that they do), they pull strings just like the canonical iteration of their mother would. Ravenwing, Frecklewish, Appledusk, and - moreover - Oakstar, all suffer painful deaths as a result of the angry StarClan kits. To add insult to injury, all four lose their lives to the river while patrolling it - or are tricked into falling in. The kits drag them down until they drown.

Ravenwing and Oakstar are the only two who are able to make it to StarClan themselves, if only because of the good acts they've done to balance out the karma. The kits, however, are able to swing judgement on Frecklewish, who attacked their mother, insulted them, and was fine to watch them die, and Appledusk, who was willing to have them to begin with, who failed to save them.

This is unhealthy point of view, but they died as kits. All they know is the anger and betrayal.

On to the future.

Maplestar and Palebird have the three kits; Finchkit, Larkkit, and Firekit. Some people didn't seem to get it, and I thought I wrote it to be obvious, but Firekit is supposed to be THE Firestar in the future. With Maplestar at the helm of WindClan, ShadowClan is unable to drive them out. ThunderClan, however, is much weaker after their constant battles with RiverClan and the loss of not only Redtail, but many other great warriors. ThunderClan is driven out instead; WindClan, in their graciousness, would allow them to share the territory until something can be done about ShadowClan's terrible leader, and three Clans would unite against the one to protect their way of life.

During their time in WindClan's camp, Firepaw would grow close to the ThunderClan apprentices Ravenpaw, Graypaw and Sandpaw. Following the battle against Brokenstar, not only do Firepaw and his siblings get their warrior names, but so do the ThunderClan apprentices who participated (Sandstorm and Dustpelt included). Fireheart realizes during the night of his vigil that he doesn't want to lose his ThunderClan friends, and while meeting his family on the battlefield would be painful, he would feel worse fighting Graystripe or Ravenflight - the latter tom being the only cat Fireheart has met that makes his heart flutter.

The following day, as ThunderClan returns home, Fireheart goes with them. Yellowfang, in turn, has joined ThunderClan, having been a crucial asset to getting them in and out of ShadowClan. In return for the WindClan warrior, Spottedleaf stays; Spottedleaf had been attacked by a ShadowClan warrior the day before the battle, but Hawkheart protected her with his life. Feeling indebted, she swore to finish training Barkwing and serve WindClan just as she did ThunderClan.

The rest of the story would have gone similarly to canon, with a few minor changes; for one, WindClan and ThunderClan would forever have a close bond, not only through the blood of their Clanmates, but also through Bluestar and Maplestar, who exchanged each

other's stories and bonded over how similar they were. Cinderpelt would have still gotten disabled, but through saving the ShadowClan apprentice Littlepaw from a monster; while she picks up healing from Yellowfang, she remains a warrior in spite of her leg. Swiftpaw narrowly survives, and Brightpaw lives with her scarring still, taking inspiration from Cinderpelt. Fireheart and Ravenflight become mates and have kits - Squirrelflight and Gingerpool.

I had further plans for TNP and PO3, but they're sort of lost to time at this point. The general ideas surrounded Brambleclaw - renamed Brambleflower - taking after his mother instead of his father, and being close friends with Squilf, but not mates. Gingerpool and Crowfeather do have kits, and Squilf does take them, but claims they were loner kits that she chose to raise. Bramble was their nursery parent, having chosen to be a queen instead of a warrior, and took care of them while Squilf went about being a warrior, only tuning in to feed them and sleep with them. Jay would have become a warrior named Jayclaw and Holly, an albino in this AU, would go on to be Gingerpool's apprentice and become Hollysnow. Jay is blind, and Holly is a selective mute. Lion would still have his powers of strength, but use them unwisely, and he would be the one to wind up having a crisis and revealing the secrets of his origin before disappearing into the caves.

The general idea for the OOTS arc of this AU was to give Ivy powers and still have her train in the Dark Forest, under Lionblaze - who is very much still alive, but misaligned. Dovewing would be given the opportunity as well, and only take it when she learns Tigerheart is also training there. Their struggles would surround a constant sibling rivalry, one that would deepen once Jay and Holly figure out Ivy is the third cat. I also threw around the idea of a deaf Ivypool, either from birth or caused by something much later - just to complete the "See/Speak/Hear No Evil".

The underlying, long plot to the AU was that Petalkit, Larchkit, and Patchkit effectively replaced Canon Mapleshade. Maplestar recovered, then seemingly forgot about her previous kits and replaced them with Fire, Finch and Lark. Petal, Larch and Patch want stupid, special Firestar and his bloodline to suffer for being

their replacements. Technically, they were still spirits of StarClan, but pulled the strings in the Dark Forest.

Oh, boy. Those sure were a lot of words, huh.

I hope I'm not disappointing anyone by discontinuing this story. Again, looking back on it, I'm very unhappy with the way I was handling certain subjects and aspects of the story - and I'd rather kill it before I get carried away again. I've always held the belief that taking time and writing a more consise and well-placed narrative is much better than writing it quickly and breaking characters and morals. Mapleshade is a character I do want to do justice by, and Warrior Cats is a great sandbox to play in!

All that being said, I am still writing Warriors works. On AO3, I've published a couple smaller one-off stories that explore the idea of Tigerclaw not getting twisted up by Thistleclaw, and getting Scourge to join ThunderClan instead. You're welcome to read them if you haven't yet!

And I'm not done with Mapleshade, either. I'm currently working on a new, seperate Warriors rewrite based on the same time (with better allegiances); the working title for it, right now, is Falling Petals. I don't want to give too much away, but if there's enough interest, I might post a teaser excerpt to this story! There's no telling when I'll be finished with it, but I would much rather publish a finished work in full than post it by chapter and run the risk of losing interest or being unhappy with what I've put out.

A final project I'm working on is a personal Warrior Cats story called Rising Storm - it'll surround some OC Clans and Characters instead of rewriting canon material, and I'm looking for a main platform to post it on when I crack into it! If you're interested, I could use some beta readers when I start working on it, so please get in touch if you want to help out! If you know any non-Wattpad or AO3 websites I could publish the story on, please do let me know. I'll likely crosspost here, but I don't actively post on here too often, so I'd rather it not be the primary host.

I think that's everything I wanted to say! Again, thank you so much for your continued interest in my work. If you'd like to see more of

what I do, look for the user 'ghastimafrix' on Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube, deviantART, AO3, and toyhou.se! I do a lot more than just write Warriors, and I'm always happy to chat.

Stay frosty, y'all!!